

We Are *How* We Eat

BY L O R I B R A N D B A T E M A N , R . D .

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For Christians, the quandary of how to live *in* but not *of* the world is nothing new. When we realize eating is our most intimate reception of the gifts of God, and when we begin to understand how our food consumption habits can impact our individual and collective well-being, we realize that food should be deeply connected to our faith. Three books, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schlosser (New York: Perennial, 2002, 400 pp., \$14.95), *Breaking Bread: The Spiritual Significance of Food* by Sara Covin Juengst (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992, 113 pp., \$14.95), and *Feasting with God: Adventures in Table Spirituality* by Holly Whitcomb (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996, 184 pp., \$16.95), challenge us to reexamine our eating habits in relation to our discipleship. Taken together, they portray a clear conception of contemporary individual and social problems related to food, and offer suggestions for recapturing the spiritual meaning of food so that people of faith can become more connected to each other, creation, and ultimately, God.

LOSING OUR CONNECTIONS

After reading these books, I recently experienced a real disconnect between my faith and the way I eat. On a blistering summer day in early June while traveling through Louisiana on I-20, our family was pretty uncomfortable: my two preschoolers were whining, my husband was tired of driving, and we were all cramped and hot. Needless to say, we needed a break. I saw a sign for McDonald's Playland and without thinking I suggested we stop at the restaurant. Immediately, everyone's mood lifted.

When we arrived, the McDonald's felt like an oasis; it was clean, bright, and cool inside, with a colorful playground attached. The workers were accommodating, the food was healthier than I expected (with low fat milk and salads balancing out the burgers and fries), and the Happy Meals included a fuzzy toy called a "Neopet" that made my preschoolers' day. As our family sat blissfully consuming our lunch, the McDonald's Corporation was seemingly providing us a great service, for only \$13.10. However, I could not ignore my underlying guilt prompted by Schlosser's proclamation that the convenience of fast food has had a great but hidden societal price. In the choice I made that day, my desire for convenience was in conflict with my values related to consumption and community.

While other authors have explored the breakdown of community in general, Schlosser highlights the specific damage from the dramatic changes in how we produce and consume food. He notes that the way food is processed has changed more in the past forty years than in the previous forty thousand (p. 7). In twenty-first century America, independent farmers no longer supply nourishing foods for meals shared around breakfast, lunch, and dinner tables. Instead, our inexpensive food often is processed beyond recognition and against our healthiness. We are becoming increasingly detached from the production of our food. We do not know where it comes from, because we're unfamiliar with the people who grow, process, or prepare our food.

We've also become more detached from those with whom we would share our food and from God who is the ultimate giver of our food, for we do not take time to eat consciously and thankfully with others. Though grocery stores carry tens of thousands of items, many families rarely cook meals or eat together. In the typical American family, each member on his or her own schedule consumes disjointed meals and snacks while on the way to the next activity.

Further, many of us have developed unhealthy relationships with food itself. While some bow to the pressure to conform to cultural images of thinness that can lure us into harmful diets and eating disorders, others suffer from obesity, which is now an epidemic and perhaps the greatest threat to our public health.

RECONNECTING WITH THE BIBLICAL STORY

Anthropologists claim a society expresses itself as much through its food habits as it does through language. Therefore, the way we eat is a primary artifact of who we are and what we believe about ourselves, the world, and God. Indeed, eating is a spiritual exercise. Whitcomb's *Feasting with God* and Juengst's *Breaking Bread* provide a valuable perspective for people of faith who seek to recapture the enjoyment of food as a meaningful symbol of who they are.

Juengst and Whitcomb's books complement each other well. Juengst

surveys the biblical background on the meaning of food and gives practical suggestions for utilizing food's symbolic significance to enrich our lives; Whitcomb offers ideas for intentional gatherings that explore one or more aspects of Christian faith. Both authors remind us that in our busy lives, we've pushed food away from the holy and compromised our life together. Thankfully, they provide hope for recapturing the connection between faith and food.

Juengst examines the Bible for insight into how we can reclaim the sacredness of food and thereby nourish our spiritually and emotionally hungry lives. She structures *Breaking Bread* around six theological themes: stewardship, hospitality, bonding, compassion, celebration, and hope and restoration. In each chapter, Juengst carefully analyzes one theme through Scripture before she offers "Food for Thought" (additional insights from a variety of authors) and "Recipes for Action" (practical suggestions for enhancing the theme in the reader's own experience).

Juengst relates much of the biblical story to food through these themes. Under the first, *stewardship*, she explains food as a gift from God. God is the loving gardener who provides food, and since it originates from God, food is to be "treated sacramentally." Gluttony is an aberration in receiving God's good gift. The second theme, *hospitality*, focuses on how we should use food to welcome and care for others. Both Testaments advise the practice of hospitality, especially toward strangers. In sharing food together, strangers become friends, and this is demonstrated in the third theological theme, *bonding*. Eating together breaks down barriers and is important in nurturing and healing human relationships. Also, we demonstrate our *compassion* for one another through the distribution of food, and the Bible continuously

calls us to demand justice for the poor and hungry. But Christians should not feel guilty about *celebrating* with food, the fifth theme. In Israel's feasts, the Passover Meal, and the Lord's Supper, food is used to celebrate and remember God's graciousness. And the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the Messianic Banquet that will be the world's ultimate *hope and restoration*.

Where Juengst ends, Whitcomb begins her "adventures" with practical ideas for enacting the hopes and dreams of the Messianic Banquet. Throughout her book she vividly embodies many of the themes present ed

Scriptural explorations of stewardship, hospitality, bonding, compassion, celebration, and hope and restoration, guide us to reclaim the sacredness of food and thereby nourish our spiritually and emotionally hungry lives.

by Juengst. Drawing on her skills as pastor and cook, Whitcomb creatively converts the motifs that she gleans from biblical wisdom into plans for gatherings among family, friends, and acquaintances. The first section of *Feasting with God*, which is entitled "Feasts," focuses on entire meals, while the second, "Culinary Interludes," uses food in various aspects of devotional reflection. In feasts and culinary interludes with names like "Rites of Passage: A Feast of New Beginnings," "Nature's Bounty: A Summer Picnic," and "Tea and Sabbath," Whitcomb exudes respect for the holiness of God and sacredness of God's creation as she serves up insights into the meaning of food as a sacred symbol. She weaves together recipes, scriptural passages, popular songs, spiritual guidance, activities, and brief meditations (based on a variety of authors such as Walter Brueggemann, James Fowler, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Heschel) to enrich the motif for each meal or interlude.

Not everyone will feel comfortable at Whitcomb's enthusiastic, revealing, and reflective gatherings. Introverted guests and those who are not familiar with others in the group may feel intruded upon and out of place. Some may find a few of Whitcomb's themes too bold. However, Whitcomb makes clear that she's merely offering suggestions to be molded to the tastes of the host and guests. Her point is that the table is a significant place for faith to be revealed and community to be enriched. Juengst and Whitcomb agree that when we relegate food to the mundaneness of day-to-day subsistence, we lose an important connection not only to other people, but also to God.

FROM FAST FOOD TO GOOD FOOD NATION

Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* may seem misplaced in this trio of books since it does not claim to come from a Christian perspective, until we notice that what Schlosser presents is the mirror image of what Juengst and Whitcomb propose. Schlosser cites facts, trends, and stories about fast food to illustrate the cultural, economic, and societal factors that have led to the decline in the sacredness of food and eating.

Fast food emerged within a changing North American culture, and, in turn, it played a significant role in shaping those cultural trends. To realize the impact of fast food, consider that McDonald's is responsible for ninety percent of the new jobs in the United States; the Golden Arches is a more recognizable symbol world-wide than the Cross; the typical American consumes three hamburgers and four orders of fries each week; and from an order of fries priced at \$1.50, a potato farmer receives about two cents (pp. 4-6, 117).

Schlosser's statistics come alive through his use of story. He introduces us to migrant workers exploited by meat-packing companies, children who have died from food poisoning after eating fast food, fast food employees who receive the lowest wages permissible by law with no benefits, restau-

rant executives who fight every proposal to increase the minimum wage, and advertising executives who market unhealthy fast food to vulnerable children. In addition to presenting the problems, Schlosser offers suggestions for changing them. His solutions are more specific, but overlap with Juengst's ideas of seeking justice. No one is forced to eat fast food, and the fast food industry will change its practices if its customers demand it.

If we simply boycott fast food restaurants, we will not address the deeper issues of justice, compassion, and community. Instead, we must address some difficult questions: Why, in our society, is it a cultural phenomenon (of which the fast food industry is only one example) that a cheap product, prepared as quickly as possible and with almost no regard for the welfare of the people who prepare or consume it, becomes the industry standard? And, are we in the church willing to change this?

Of course, we should not ignore the fact that innovations in food technology have made positive impacts on society: many more people can be fed; women in particular have more freedom to pursue endeavors outside the home; and we're more interrelated with other regions of the world. Yet, to better nourish ourselves, our families, and the society in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways, some changes in our current priorities may be necessary. Individual actions will not be enough to solve the alienation we experience with regard to food; we must be willing to change our attitude regarding food.

Each of the books discussed here, by offering ways to reconnect to our friends, family, local community, and God, guide us to live better in the world without uncritically adopting its values. Fast food may provide an occasional welcome break in our journeys, but visiting locally owned restaurants, gathering for simple meals with friends, and sharing picnics with our families in the park will make our lives richer.



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